

John Matthew Upledger, CranioSacral Therapy Column 3, submitted July 9, 2012

CranioSacral Therapy and the High-Performance Athlete

By John Matthew Upledger

The life of a high-performance athlete has always amazed me. The grueling training schedules. The intense focus. The sheer athleticism. There is a commitment level to this kind of competitor that I can't begin to fathom. I was reminded of this as I watched the 2012 summer Olympic games from the air-conditioned comfort of my living-room couch.

Of course, with that drive to excel can come a sacrifice of health as the body is continually pushed to the limits of its potential. This got me thinking about athletes in general and how they can benefit from CranioSacral Therapy. I found a prime example in a competitive athlete named Rick*.

CST keeps cyclist centered

At age 49, Rick is in peak physical condition. A professional cyclist and adventure racer for much of his adult life, he maintains an extremely active lifestyle. Along with cycling he is an avid runner, skate skier and backcountry skier.

Rick's training regimen is intense, to say the least. There is mountain biking and trail running, which subjects his body to severe elevation gains and losses. There are marathon sessions on a rowing machine. And there are rigorous plyometric exercises he undergoes to boost his performance. The idea of plyometric movements is to push the muscles to exert maximum force in a small amount of time in order to develop muscular power and improve overall speed.

By any definition Rick is a high-performance athlete.

For six years Rick has been the client of Dominique Tardif, MT, in Boise, Idaho. He first came to Dominique looking for sports massage to keep his body "tuned up" and operating at peak performance.

Then one day Rick came in commenting that he didn't feel "centered" on his road bicycle. Chalking it up to a problem with his bike, he said he was going to take it to a mechanic for an assessment.

Suspecting that Rick's bike was not the problem, Dominique suggested a new approach. She had recently taken her first CranioSacral Therapy class and thought the techniques would be beneficial given the symptoms he described.

Rick initially had a hard time wrapping his mind around the value of what Dominique described: a technique that used only about 5 grams of touch. How could something that gentle help him?

By the end of the session, Rick was a believer.

Using the CST 10-step protocol, Dominique said, "I found restrictions at every listening station! He experienced significant releases throughout his system that day, predominately at his sacrum, thoracic outlet, parietals, temporals and sphenoid."

Later that week, Rick sent Dominique an e-mail saying that he was perfectly centered once again on his bike, without the help of a mechanic. “I dare say that caught his attention!” she said.

Since that time, CST has become a regular addition to Rick’s sessions.

During a recent appointment, Dominique began her assessment, taking Rick’s heels in her hands. “I felt a strong pull cephalad on his left side,” she said. “At his left ASIS I felt an anterior medial pull. I asked him if he was feeling any pulls or strains in his body.” Rick mentioned that he felt a left side/off-center pull.

Dominique continued through the listening stations, arcing and assessing for fascial restrictions and facilitated segments. “I used a variation on the 10-step protocol,” she said. “I added in CST-based, light-touch deeper fascial work with direction of energy and nonverbal dialoguing with the tissue. The biggest releases were at his sacrum/SI joint/ hips/legs. The final polish was added with the cranial vault holds.”

Immediately after the session Rick reported that he felt fully centered and evenly planted through both feet. Nine days later he went on what he called his “first hard run in a long time”—a seven-plus mile run in hilly terrain. He wrote Dominique to say, “I felt totally centered—like a metronome or a set of pistons—balanced and relentless.”

Tips for working with athletes

As Dominique discovered with Rick, the application of a light-touch technique such as CranioSacral Therapy often requires a new understanding of how the body responds to gentle, directed touch—or at least a willingness to give it a try. That goes for both the client and therapist!

Dominique says, “CST taught me how to have a different conversation with tissue. I find that I can get deeper releases with a lighter touch.

“I work with a lot of athletes, and I find them generally to have a higher awareness of their bodies than the average person. If there is a challenge it is to convince them that one does not necessarily have to dig deeply into their tissue for them to benefit from the session.”

Rick says, “Dominique has made me aware that a CranioSacral Therapy session can be a key part of overall maintenance and healing in addition to deep-tissue sports massage.”

Appointments with Dominique now almost always include CST—even if it’s simply doing a still-point induction to start the session, she says.

In Rick’s case, sessions average 90 minutes and are scheduled to coincide with rest days in his training. “I always encourage athletes to schedule their sessions with me on a planned rest day in their training regimen and only to do a light workout or just yoga/stretching the following day,” she says.

“When Rick is feeling a need for a thorough combination, I will split the session between CST and massage. At times we have gone two hours if he wants a full CST session and a full massage.”

Working with other clients within a standard hour-long massage session, Dominique is still able to maximize CST's potential. She will quietly arc and assess their craniosacral rhythm at the beginning of the session and then bring in whatever aspects of CST the body guides her to do.

“CST has been invaluable in my practice,” Dominique says. “It has given me another modality to expand my practice and client base. It has deepened my conversation with the body and tissue, teaching me that often less is more. And it has encouraged me to ‘get out of the way’ and let the client be the guide.”

This approach to bodywork can benefit people in all walks and seasons of life—whether they're an elite athlete, a weekend golfer, or a guy cheering on his favorite Olympians from the comfort of his living-room couch.

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*Named changed

***John Matthew Upledger** is the CEO of Upledger Institute International. For 25 years, he has been actively engaged in all aspects of the organization—from education to clinical services. His strict adherence to delivering high-quality continuing education has solidly positioned UII as the leading provider in manual therapy education. For more information about CranioSacral Therapy and other modalities offered for study through Upledger Institute International go to www.iahe.com*